

## With Respect to Social Classes in the [Guatemalan] Revolution of October

### **Huberto Alvarado**

The multi-class movement of June 1944, after achieving its initial objective of deposing president Ubico, maintained for several months its anti-dictatorial features as the principal expression of its character. However when the country's internal situation and the influence of the anti-fascist struggle in the world carried it forward to result in the military and civilian uprising of October 1944, it showed its pronounced democratic bourgeois tendency.

The democratic movement spontaneously reflected the desperation and decision of the urban masses, headed by a scarcely organized petty bourgeois sector. Given the heterogeneous breadth of the participating social forces, what was then called the “unity of the Guatemalan family” was nothing more than the expression of a multi-class movement that proposed the establishment of liberal legality and the exercise of elemental democratic rights. The October 1944 decree by the Revolutionary Governing Junta that proclaimed the objectives of the movement described the significance of the new regime, the conditions of the moment and the limits of the “postulates” of the revolution which, as formulated on that occasion, had a progressive impact.

The landed oligarchy had no illusions in regard to the “unity of the Guatemalan family” and, seeing its political domination affected, did not try to adapt itself to the new times but instead clung to the past. From then onward the contradictions present in the bosom of Guatemalan society that had exploded from June to October 1944 continued to make their presence felt in various levels and degrees. In the euphoria of the first hours, in the intoxication that was produced at having ended the nightmare of the Ubico dictatorship, there were already arising political, social and economic demands that prefigured future conflicts. Petty bourgeois ideology, democratic but always heterogeneous, found in the cult of Arévalo its reformist expression, with a formula that in its essence did not tend to break down the basis of the domination of the landed oligarchy but only to modernize it. Nevertheless, moved by its own initial impulse, by the dynamics of the contradictions of an outdated socioeconomic formation, and by the stimulation of the changes occurring at a world level, the rhythm of class struggle began to accelerate.

### **The political environment**

The Popular Liberation Front (*Frente Popular Libertador*), that arose as the political party of the youth, obtained in the first instance the support of large sectors precisely for its formula: programmatic breadth with limited objectives. However, as groups of the national bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie became differentiated as a function of economic interests and political propositions, divisions arose and led to the formation of new organizations. One of them, the Revolutionary Action Party (*Partido Acción Revolucionaria*), tried to bring together some of the popular demands in order to capture the participation of the masses. This caused the dispute over the peasants, the principal electoral clientele, to become one of the major activities of the parties.

Confronted with the difficulty of finding the formula for their own political organization, the dominant classes utilized more economic associations as pressure groups, but did not discard the procedure of influencing from within the leaderships of the petty bourgeois parties and, more directly, in the bosom of the government and, principally, of the army. The ministries were shared amongst bourgeois and petty bourgeois politicians of highly diverse viewpoints, some of them of dubious democratic thought.

Open political activity began again after fourteen years of obscurantist silence. One could say that it was necessary to learn the meaning of the word “freedom” and to exercise democratic rights. Old-line politicians, who continued lamenting for a return to the past, could not find a way to lead or influence a movement that overflowed with its youthfulness and spontaneity, although the realities that could have permitted this to occur continued very much extant.

The deafening propaganda of the allies against Nazi fascism and the proclamatory deployment of the four freedoms found an echo that the Ubico dictatorship and its successors could not diminish. The Second World War became the great precipitator of internal contradictions which quickly flourished. The Soviet Union, then the only socialist country, for a moment became an admired ally and not an enemy. The democratic petty bourgeoisie imprinted its enthusiasm, its vacillations and its peculiar radicalism on the initial period, while the landed oligarchy, perplexed and without the effective patronage of United States' imperialism, did not find the secure road of previous times. The rupture with the past – that in good measure occurred as a split between generations – did not grow more profound because of specifically petty bourgeois limitations, but sought new directions with an impulse for renovation although with more enthusiasm than clarity and definition of objectives.

### **Reformism**

Thirty years later one can judge with more objectivity, although with superficiality if the events are analyzed outside of their context and one forgets what the fourteen years of the Ubico dictatorship and the abysmal backwardness in which Guatemala lived signified for the country and its inhabitants. It is necessary to remember that many students went directly from their university classrooms to the seats of Congress and high government posts, and that the struggle against Ubico began as a confrontation between youthful students and the tyrannical government. Those are the facts of the situation that color events and mark the beginning of the process but do not determine its later development.

Political and union organization, the first worker-employer conflicts, the labor code, the establishment of social security, the broadening of the limited public education, university autonomy, banking reform and laws to promote industry were typically reformist measures but ones which started a process that began to change the face of the country. However the pillars of imperialist and oligarchic domination were maintained. The Arévalo government was not a faithful protector of the interests of the monopolies of the United States and the oligarchy, although the repressive apparatus of the State was ready to prevent the urban and agricultural workers and peasants from crossing the line. Nevertheless the oligarchy and monopolies, which saw their political power limited, lost no occasion to try to take back the reins, resorting with tenacious frequency to the traditional Latin American method: military conspiracy leading to a coup d'état. The attempts failed one after another confronted with an Arbenz who was vigilant, firm and with initiative. In July 1949 the most serious attempt transpired: the military uprising by the Guard of Honor that occurred as a result of the death of the chief of the Armed Forces, colonel Francisco Javier Arana, when government contingents tried to capture him so as to destroy the conspiracy in which he was involved. The defeat of the reactionary rebellion at the hands of the democratic sector of the army headed by Arbenz, supported by appreciable groups of workers, students and peasants, led to a radicalization of the movement and opened the way for development of the revolutionary project.

Arevalismo was essentially a petty bourgeois tendency, with the limitations, vacillations, dishonesties, idealist adventurism and commitments particular to that social layer. It respected the rules of the game

of bourgeois judicial legality but, although it sought in the workers and peasants the support that it needed to survive, feared the unitary organization of the unions, limited or prohibited the organization of agricultural workers and peasants, and impeded the appearance of the political party of the working class. Arévalo promoted and maintained the division of the union movement. In spite of this the masses learned through their own experience and the popular classes made use of their democratic rights.

The growth of dependent capitalism and the democratic exercise in themselves gave cause, although in diverse and uneven forms, for class struggle. The ten years of the movement of October comprise a process in which the reformist phase of the Arévalo government (1945-1951) was necessarily overtaken by the revolutionary phase of the Arbenz government (1951-1954). The analysis of such a process has to be done within the national and international frameworks of the decade that began when Arbenz arrived in power. The accelerated maturation of the internal conditions of Guatemala occurred in the midst of the intensification of the cold war, democratic decline in Latin America, and the defeat of reformist governments, when imperialism attacked the People's Republic of Korea, staged its provocations in Democratic Germany, and was threatening to drop the atomic bomb on Vietnam. It is the era – never to be forgotten – in which the frenzied butcher John Foster Dulles ruled the United States, in front of and behind the disinterested Eisenhower. At the start of the decade of the 50s Guatemala was isolated within the continent and assaulted from all sides.

### **The working class**

Internally the contradictions intensified and the working class entered the scene and began to play, with correctness and errors, its own role. On September 28, 1949, the constituent congress of the party of Guatemalan communists was held semi-clandestinely. In October 1951 the central union federation was created: the General Confederation of Workers of Guatemala (*Confederación General de Trabajadores de Guatemala*). In 1952 the unified federation of peasants was organized: the National Peasant Federation of Guatemala (*Confederación Nacional Campesina de Guatemala*). These conditions began to permit that the working class and peasants, together with a sector of the national bourgeoisie and the parties of the democratic petty bourgeoisie, were able to provide support and impulse to the Arbenz government and its program in a more decided way and, in some measure, to stamp the revolutionary movement with a more advanced aspect. These conditions made possible application of the Agrarian Reform Law, proclaimed in June 1952, that made real the anti-feudal content of the revolution at the same time that other aspects of the political economy of Arbenz were articulating the anti-imperialist character of the process.

The sacred nature of landed private property was questioned in the light of a new concept of its social function and a more profound idea of legality. The large estates (*latifundia*), the bastion of power of the landed oligarchy and the then all powerful United Fruit Company, were affected. The agrarian reform put on the road to political action thousands of peasants in every corner of the country through the formation of local Agrarian Committees that placed the struggle for land in the hands of the very people interested and that, in those conditions, created what could become the embryo of a future local popular power. At the same time urban and agricultural workers, united in their unitary confederation, began various strikes against Guatemalan and foreign employers demanding wage increases and benefits until then unknown, without being repressed by State force or manipulated by the government.

### **The national bourgeoisie**

At the start of the decade of the 40s the diverse fractions of the dominant classes did not show much

differentiation because of the high degree of intertwining of agricultural, industrial, commercial and banking interests. Nevertheless there existed and were manifested some contradictions that were resolved by the Ubico government in favor of the landed oligarchy. Foreign investment (mainly United States' and German) resided in agriculture (bananas and coffee) and in public services (railways and electrical energy). The October revolution, because of its own dynamic and, in part, due to the new imperialist strategy, promoted the growth of industrial activity under the banner of a dependent capitalism. A policy of industrial development was undertaken and, with greater precision and definitely nationalistic purposes, during the Arbenz government the following objectives were outlined: 1) convert a dependent country with a semi-colonial economy into an economically independent country; 2) transform a backward country with a predominantly feudal economy into a modern capitalist country; and 3) perform the transformation in such a way as to be able to achieve the greatest possible increase in the standard of living of the large masses of the people.

Due to their bourgeois and landed character, the interests of the oligarchy were simultaneously affected and furthered. On the whole the oligarchy, politically reactionary, did not view with sympathy an economic policy of this nature. Only a fraction of the bourgeoisie, those whose interests had a national scope, supported some of the policies of Arbenz. To speak with greater precision, it gave a certain amount of support to the measures that went against the outdated landholding regime, but maintained its caution in regard to affecting imperialism and its complete aversion to the activity of the working class and peasants. The bourgeois sector then described as progressive did not see in the process "its revolution", but rather a movement that in part it could lead, but that also, confronted with some radicalized middle class sectors that aspired to something more and a working class that was beginning to expect to advance much more, in great measure escaped its control.

Fundamentally the character of the October revolution was bourgeois democratic inasmuch as it tried to resolve the contradiction between precapitalist remnants and the growth of capitalism. But since the process occurred in the epoch of imperialist predominance, upon becoming more profound and accentuating the political leadership of the most advanced sector of the petty bourgeoisie, and increasing the role of the working class and the poor and medium peasants, it had to try to deepen, in addition to its anti-feudal tasks, its anti-imperialist tasks, because of which the character of the October revolution in its most progressive stage tended to be national democratic.

It was in this sense that the national industrial bourgeoisie (little developed and not sufficiently differentiated, as we have stated) was not able to feel that it was "its revolution". The principal political, economic and social tasks were laid out in the 1945 Constitution, whose content was landed bourgeois, because of which it attempted to lay the basis to consolidate the fundamental interests of such classes. But in it there was an influence of the democratic thought of the petty bourgeoisie, legalizing political freedoms, workplace laws and social security, and introducing the concept of the social function of private property, the protectionist activity of the State in favor of the working masses, and state intervention to promote the country's economic development within capitalism. The Constitution guaranteed traditional class interests but it was sufficiently heterogeneous to allow the progressive classes, under certain circumstances, to propose the objective of overcoming the precapitalist and dependent reality of the country within a bourgeois but independent and nationalist framework.

The Arévalo government never really touched the agrarian problem nor substantially affected the economic base of the foreign monopolies. Through increasing numerically and organizing itself in unions and politically, the working class began to play a more active political role and influenced the

masses to advance the revolutionary process, extricating it from the characteristic reformism of the Arévalo government by means of a resolute struggle to deepen its agrarian and anti-imperialist content. Thus began to be clearly defined the opposing positions in the national and international arenas.

### **The agrarian and anti-imperialist agenda**

The agrarian reform, that had as its goal “to liquidate feudal property in the countryside and the relations of production that fostered it so as to develop the capitalist form of exploitation and methods of production in agriculture, and prepare the way for the industrialization of Guatemala”, in its two years of application was the most profound revolutionary effort in Guatemalan history, not only because of its orientation, the amount of land turned over and expropriations realized (that undermined the economic power of the landed oligarchy), but also due to the peasant mobilization that it produced throughout the country. The vital problem of landholding required direct confrontation with the local oligarchy and affected in an equally direct form the United Fruit Company, the most powerful United States' company then installed in the country. The confrontation with the other U.S. companies had other characteristics, such as in the case of the International Railways of Central America and Electric Bond and Share, that were challenged through construction of the Route to the Atlantic (to break the transport monopoly), of the national port of Santo Tomás (to end the port monopoly), and of the Jurún Marinalá hydroelectric facility (to end the decisive foreign influence in the industry).

In the field of international politics, the adolescent adventures of the years of the Arévalo government (when failed invasions to overthrow the reactionary governments of Osmin Aguirre in El Salvador, Trujillo in the Dominican Republic and Somoza in Nicaragua were promoted) came to an end. The Arbenz government initiated a policy aimed at making Guatemala independent of the rigid tutelage of the United States government and monopolies, that would allow applying a foreign policy conforming to national and Latin American interests, which was expressed in the refusal of Guatemala in 1951 to send soldiers, even if only “symbolically”, to support United States' aggression in the People's Republic of Korea; Guatemalan votes in the Sixth Assembly of the United Nations, held in Paris in 1951-52, when the delegation was led by the prestigious intellectuals Enrique Muñoz Meany and Luis Cardoza y Aragón, which were eleven times with the socialist countries, eight of which were against the United States; and in the Seventh U.N. Assembly, held in New York in 1952-53, on which occasion Guatemala voted with the socialist countries nine times, and advocated recognition of the independence of British Guyana (Guyana) and to apply to the Puerto Rican reality the treatment corresponding to a colony, an action that directly affected the United States. (The situation that warranted such a position finally had to be recognized by the U.N. in 1954).

### **The reasoning of the counterrevolution**

To the extent that the revolution deepened, the sector of the national bourgeoisie that had committed itself to the effort tried to reduce its momentum, it withdrew or it made an effort to win over the comfortable middle class layers which, also influenced by the bourgeoisie in general, were passing to a second or third level [of commitment] or were waiting in expectation. The revolutionary wage earners, working class and peasants were occupying the advanced posts, although the latter two groups had not reached the stage of leadership of the movement. The lack of political maturity, vision and audacity, and a more solid proletarian social base (urban and rural), did not allow the working class to achieve a hegemonic role. The weight of economic backwardness decisively influenced the regrouping of the country's social forces such that an age-old political weakness slowed the development of class consciousness and the political level. It is a fact that the maturation of subjective conditions can be

accelerated by the objective conditions, but the former are not just invented.

The committed sector of the national bourgeoisie, held captive by fear, took several steps backward and the comfortable middle layers started to abandon the ship that had gone into the storm. Conversely the working class and peasants pushed forward a revolutionary process which, although programmatically it was not yet the revolution corresponding to their alliance, it was the way to advance to more radical phases. The peasants who had received land prepared to defend it, although without being warned or advised as to what were the necessary forms of organization and struggle able to create the conditions to do so. The working class tried to lead the process but its class party was unable to reach a complete understanding of how to win hegemony.

In 1953 intervention by the United States was detected and the Guatemalan government responded with international denunciation. Internally the most serious response was represented by the Committees for Defence of National Sovereignty created by the proletarian party, which promoted from the grassroots the development of a united front and achieved positive results in several regions in their task of preparing a solid base of support for the struggle against intervention by the United States. In contrast the alliance of political parties and union and peasant federations, called the National Democratic Front, demonstrated more its vacillations than its cohesion. Arbenz stayed firm until June 27, 1954, but at the same time opportunism and ambitions amongst many politicians and members of government was growing; cases of political corruption and illicit enrichment in official spheres flourished and, most seriously, decisions to capitulate increased when faced with forces of internal reaction and imperialism.

Economic power remained in the hands of the landed bourgeois oligarchy. Political power, in the hands of the democratic petty bourgeoisie and elements of the national bourgeoisie, was converted into something gelatinous above all when the army responded to its class mission, that is to say in this concrete case, to its role as the armored fist of the dominant classes, obedient to the dictates of imperialism, and Arbenz, in the most critical moment, due to limitations of his training and the lack of maturity and initiative of the parties that supported him, did not see any possibility of defeating the intervention and opted for the false solution of resigning. As we have already said, all of this occurred in one of the most crucial junctures of the cold war.

The determining factor at the start of the revolutionary movement of October 1944 was the contradiction between the old and outworn relations of production and distribution represented by the semi-feudal landowners and the reactionary bourgeoisie that had formed in the shadow of imperialism, and the new productive forces represented by a weak national bourgeoisie, the traditional and new middle layers, the working class and the peasants. In its development this contradiction, while prevailing in essence, was altered by the revolutionary process that was situating in different positions the distinct classes and social layers to the extent that the struggle became more intense, and the situation of Guatemala as a dependent and peripheral country was complicating the delicate path that an agrarian and anti-imperialist process had to traverse in the internal and external conditions of the first half of the decade of the 1950s. When the class struggle intensified, all the sophistries, felonies and cowardness arose in unison and every weapon was used. In that moment the exploited classes had not learned from their own experience that the dominant classes are capable of all types of ploys when they consider their privileges to be in danger, and when they do so it is necessary to resort to every means, resource and initiative, and to apply the advice of the revolutionaries of all times – “audacity, audacity and more audacity” – in order to confront the counterrevolution.

## **The peasants**

The ladino and indigenous peasants had not been actors in the actions that led to the fall of the Ubico dictatorship. The process was incorporating them into the changes occurring in the country, starting with the alteration produced in the peasant community through the activity of the political parties that even contributed to the traditional political-religious authority that prevailed in many indigenous communities being internally questioned. The dispute for an electoral clientele produced such results from the beginning in some regions of the country. The extension and deepening of the revolutionary process carried the phenomenon to other regions. At the start of the decade of the 50s, some indigenous highland communities were already changing their traditional way of viewing problems of local power. The process was extending, driven by its own dynamic.

Union and peasant organization began to put into movement the ladino and indigenous peasant masses demanding better wages and rental of land, acquiring a radical character with the demand for land. Taking advantage of the effects of centuries of oppression, the power of landowners, sectarian errors that put small landowners and well-off peasants into conflict with middle and poor peasants, and purely local conflicts of various types, the reactionary forces were able to manoeuvre and sow some confusion in trying to restrain the demand for land. It was useless. The concrete reality of the turnover of land and the active role that the Local Agrarian Committees began to play put in motion the rural masses, which actively joined the agrarian movement, closed ranks with the [rural] workers (who had been the first recipients of the handover of land), and the most advanced peasants joined the proletarian party itself.

The sharpening of class struggle in the countryside was forced to confront the limitations of the petty bourgeoisie, the conservative or moderate mentality of civil and military officials, the concerns of the bourgeoisie and radicalism specific to the revolutionary process. It is important to emphasize the fact that indigenous peasantry was beginning to react on the basis of its class consciousness, its situation as a semi-proletariat of dispossessed and exploited peasants. Without abandoning due to this single aspect the particular forms through which is expressed its social consciousness, it joined with energy and determination the struggle for its economic, social and political rights in all of those regions in which the revolutionary process began to deepen.

The superstructural transformations begun in 1944 were reinforced from 1952 to 1954 when the landholding regime began to change at an accelerated pace. Then the peasants, indigenous and ladinos saw by means of their own experience the vigorous impact of the agrarian reform and understood that their lives were entering a new stage. So it was that appreciable numbers of poor and middle peasants, indigenous and ladinos, started to be actors in the revolutionary process and swell the ranks of the peasant and union organizations.

### **The principal lesson**

The explanation for the frustration of the movement of October 1944 is to be found in the economic interests and political conduct of the various classes and social layers, and of United States' imperialism. The experience arising from the concrete events themselves becomes the source of the principal lesson that classes and strata interested in a revolutionary change need to analyze again and again. In that examination the economic, social and political reality such as it is must not be confused with the voluntarist dream of what could or could not be. Neither should this lead to the lamentable equivocation of trying to cover up the political errors of a revolutionary class or its party, but rather to learn from these with simplicity, clarity and energy.

It is unquestionable that the deepening of the revolutionary process would have left behind the programmatic objectives enumerated by Arbenz of converting Guatemala into a “modern and capitalist country”. In itself the progress of events, if the internal and external conditions had been otherwise, had to leave behind goals that needed to be surpassed due to historical dynamics *per se*, as the revolutionary processes in other countries confirm.

From the beginning of the movement of October the working class championed the necessity for an agrarian reform and later became one of the most active forces in promoting its application. The natural and organic alliance of the working class and the peasants began to develop and the progress of the revolutionary process would have converted it into an indestructible bastion and the basis of a much more solid and revolutionary political power. Undoubtedly U.S. imperialism perceived this conjunction of forces with utmost clarity: a young, small but combative working class, and a massive peasantry that was starting to move itself like an awakening giant, was one of the main dangers that threatened the structure of a traditional power situated within the framework of dependent capitalism, which ran the risk of being displaced by a new power having popular support, that in a more or less near-term future would break the confining capitalist mold to pass on to a democratic-popular stage en route to socialism. When Jacobo Arbenz arrived in Havana in 1961 he was correct in saying, “Cuba will not be another Guatemala, but Guatemala can be another Cuba.”

Although it could not overcome the agrarian and moderately anti-imperialist limitations, the revolutionary process reached the boundaries of a situation in which some of the conditions potentially existed, on the basis of a more active and hegemonic role on the part of the working class, and of the activity and increasingly greater and ascending weight of the majority of ladino and indigenous peasants, such as to advance towards a power comprised by such classes and the revolutionary middle class. It was a situation that, due to the international situation, the level of struggle of the country's classes, the limitations of the working class and peasantry, as well as the intervention of the United States, was made nonviable at that conjuncture. Nevertheless it is important to analyze the situation that was lived and the experiences of a precedent that revolutionary forces as a whole should take into account, both for its negative elements as well as the positive ones, because of what was done and why it was done, because of what ceased to be done and why it ceased to be done.

It is a question of examining the frustration of the revolutionary process, but a frustration that had as its essence a particularity that should be analyzed without false illusions, without romanticism, but by means of a rigorous economic, sociological and political study that permits understanding the political behavior of the working class and peasants in the years following, as well as their revolutionary potential and limitations.

### **The perspectives of the revolution**

Cut short the process that occurred between 1944 and 1954, the country headed towards an increasingly dependent capitalism, maintaining the backward precapitalist structures that have allowed power to be kept substantially in the hands of the landed bourgeois oligarchy and Guatemala under the neocolonial domination of the United States.

With midday clarity Karl Marx stated that, “Whenever a certain stage of maturity has been reached, the specific historical form is discarded and makes way for a higher one. The moment of arrival of such a crisis is disclosed by the depth and breadth attained by the contradictions and antagonisms between the distribution relations, and thus the specific historical form of their corresponding production relations,



on the one hand, and the productive forces, the production powers and the development of their agencies, on the other hand. A conflict then ensues between the material development of production and its social form.”<sup>1</sup> The essential contradiction between the new productive forces and the outworn relations of production and distribution continues and is the basis of the profound crisis of Guatemala's socioeconomic formation. But thirty years later the Guatemalan social classes are not the same. All of them have acquired experience and the class struggle is being conducted in a more complex and direct manner on every terrain: ideological, economic, political and even military. The unresolved conflicts of our country maintain that climate of permanent instability that is typical of a reactionary power incapable of resolving the fundamental problems of the nation, although the dominant classes and U.S. imperialism can still use some resources even though these become increasingly reprehensible and convert Guatemala into the country of “more violence per square kilometer”, as Spanish journalist José Pernau says.<sup>2</sup>

Many of yesterday's revolutionaries have changed totally. The banner of the October revolution is used by those who aspire to no more than to arrive in government to enjoy the privileges, and even those who serve as instruments to detain the [revolutionary] process boast of being those who continue it. Some try to convert the October revolution into a museum piece. But those who have been true to its spirit and the new generations who grew up to its rhythm or today pick up its already distant echos are, through their revolutionary action and theoretical and practical labor, the legitimate heirs of the best aspirations of the movement of October 1944 in the same way as they are of all the patriotic and nationalist struggles of our people.

It corresponds to the revolutionary classes and layers, under new conditions and with new forms of struggle, to assimilate the experiences of that decade and continue without truce the effort to make a reality the aspirations of the working class, the peasants, the salaried middle class and all the patriots who propose building, piece by piece, blow by blow, a truly free and democratic Guatemala capable of sustaining all its children, all those who as manual and intellectual workers can and must be the forgers of its future.

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1 Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. 3, p. 609; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-III.pdf>

2 José Pernau, Guatemala: desapariciones sin rastro, Libro del Año, Salvat Editores, S.A. 1973, Barcelona, Spain, p. 104